

THE PRECARIOUS CONDITION OF FEMALE: A CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

IN MAHESH DATTANI'S DRAMATIC WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani the precursor of modern English theater and drama has written his plays on diverse themes concerning the moot social problems. This paper takes into account two of his prominent plays namely *Tara* and *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* written on predicament of women in Indian society. These plays present before us two sides of the problems where the Indian women often find themselves trapped in. Tara and Bhavana, represent the archetypal modern middle class girls, who in spite of belonging to educated class suffer gender discrimination. Through these two protagonists Dattani has represented two different types of struggles that women are pitched against. The questions raised through these plays gives everyone food for thought and audience can not help but to think over them profoundly. In this sense his plays unequivocally become a contrivance of social criticism. He undergirds the cause of uplifting the position of women and moreover protecting them from the barbaric tradition of treating them always second to men.

KEYWORDS: Mahesh Dattani, Drama, Tara, the Girl who Touched the Stars, Women, Society, Gender, Discrimination, Social Criticism

INTRODUCTION

The reports on ever diminishing number of girls in India have now become a regular feature of Media news. The decline in child sex ratio in India is glaringly evident when we compare the census figures. In 1991, the figure was 947 girls to 1000 boys. Ten years later it had fallen to 927 girls for 1000 boys. Since 1991, 80% of districts in India have recorded a declining sex ratio with the state of Punjab being the worst. States like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Haryana have recorded a more than 50 point decline in the child sex ratio in this period.

The predilection for male child is solely responsible for these horrific census data. Girls are even murdered in the womb of their mother. In India this most brutal form of killing females takes place where they are killed even before they have the opportunity to see the light outside their mother's womb. More horrifying is the fact that we have started taking these news as quotidian affair and these reports and the statistics do not perturb us as they should. But to a thoughtful writer like Mahesh Dattani who is always willing to face the challenges thrown on humanity head on, this is not an issue to be left untouched. Therefore, like so many other taboos which most authors would try to pass by safely, Dattani has tried to catch the issue rather vehemently in two of his plays,

DISCUSSIONS

Tara is a play with multifaceted symbolism allied to its theme and it is also the most scathing attack on gender discrimination prevalent in Indian society. Dattani with his dexterity in dramatic exegesis has elevated the discussion on altogether different level with addition of multi layered explanations to the core discourse of the drama, which has sharpened the tooth of biting reality. Ms Asha Kuthari Chaudhari has pointed out

Tara addresses questions of gender in many ways, though not necessarily through hackneyed stereotypes of 'bias against the girl child'... With Dattani, it is never a situation that is cut- and- dried, absolving one or squarely laying the blame on the other. (P.70 Asha Kuthari Chaudhari)

Tara and her brother Chandan, who were born Siamese, have to be separated by medical surgery for their individual existence, but the situation becomes ironical as the third leg of the twins which would go better to the female half has been given to the male part. The reason behind this decision is pretty apparent here. The second leg given to Chandan did not suit him and it had to be amputated as the main blood supply to this leg was from Tara's body. This separation leaves Tara an incomplete entity physically and Chandan, her brother, mentally; though Chandan survived he could not overcome the sense of guilt throughout his life.

The injustice done to Tara, raises a question on the love and affection of parents, particularly the mother, Bharti who has always showered extra love and affection on her, just to absolve herself of the haunting guilt of depriving her own daughter of physical completion. She finds the onus of guilt too weighty to live peacefully. On the other hand the discovery of the fact that it was her mother who actually deprived her of one leg shatters Tara completely. By portraying mother a party in the injustice done to another woman Dattani has got that extra edge, coupled with Chandan's sense of incompleteness, and his affection for his sister also makes this drama an interesting study of gender criticism as Bijay Kumar Das aptly points out,

It is an irony of life that a woman (to be precise, a mother) should work against a daughter to a son. Feminism which seeks to bring gender equality to society unwittingly discriminates against women. But a brother's love for the sister transcends the gender bias. (P.49 Bijay Kumar Das)

The play also raises some serious question on the unethical practice carried out by some medical practitioners who for mercenary reasons make compromises. The two persons who are instrumental in bringing and preserving the life on the earth become party in the most heinous crime done towards an innocent life. It also puts question on role of women being an agent in suffering of other women.

The real suffering of Tara is the search of an anchor that she can rely on, where can she find solace (apart from the womb of her mother) because as soon as she took birth in this world she was punished most viciously by her nearest relatives. Probably it was the fault of nature or the God Himself, who made her a female, a creed designed by nature to be complementary to a male but forced by society to live a life of subjugation to male. Chandan, an emotionally wrecked self finds this realization overbearing, when he philosophically utters:

She never got a fair deal. Not even from nature. Neither of us did. Maybe God wanted us separated. Destiny desires strange things... But even God does not always get what he wants. Conflict is the crux of life. (330)

Tara is a play that has opened up the vistas for endless discussion on the problem of predicament of girl child and that of women in India.

Another equally powerfully play penned by Dattani on the similar theme is *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*. Although the two plays have two different set of characters, pitched up against entirely different circumstances, but whereas *Tara* loses the battle against the discrimination meted out to her, *Bhavana* seems to coming out as victorious against all odds where she proves her worth empathetically to the world over. Even her father proudly acknowledges the fact that *Bhavana* is his daughter.

Initially written as the radio play for BBC Radio 4, the play won the author many laurels in the field of stage plays. The play roughly based on Kalpana Chawla's life, with the parallel of having Indian women into the outer space for the first time. But what we see here is that the similarity ends here and it becomes the story of *Bhavana*, the protagonist of the play and this fictional character gives Dattani ample scope for exploiting his fertile imagination, and building up the core conflict of the struggle of *Bhavana* and in turn the struggle of every common Indian women who wants to touch the sky or who wants to live a life of self respect. Tracey Neale in his note on the play has rightly pointed out

It is a tribute to the bravery of Kalpana,we could explore the dilemma that confronts a women when she wants to hold on to reality and the present but finds herself drawn back into the past--- when she feels a need to understand why she has become the women she is and why she was so eager to reach out and be the girl who touched the stars. (p. 53, *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*)

The play develops on the thin fabric of the conversation between young dreamy *Bhavana*, full of aspirations for her future to reach the moon, and the grown up *Bhavana* who has accomplished those dreams i.e. the first women going to Mars in 2025.

The playwright has very craftily juxtaposes the past and present of *Bhavana* and lays bare the agonizing truth of her life. Soon after the NASA's Mars mission takes off, the space shuttle explodes and *Bhavana* finds herself face to face with her past in the form of her own childhood. Through the vague memories of young *Bhavana*, the reader gets acquaintance of her family members. Her father who now feels pride that *Bhavana* is his daughter and the fact that he is an Indian who hails from a small village in Gujarat, emerges to be a hypocrite who never wanted his daughter to study properly rather his only ambition from his daughter was to get her married and settled in *Bhuj* for the rest of her life.

Bhavana's father always pined to have boy who would carry his name forward and help to keep alive names of his forefathers. Therefore, *Bhavana* could never felt the warmth of the strong bond of father -daughter love. The discouraging attitude of her father only took *Bhavana* away from him as she could neither find the stanch support of a father nor could see a guide or friend in him and such circumstances only make a girl's life harder. This stance of her father only cemented the rebellious side of *Bhavana's* character where she wanted to prove herself better than males. In a desperate bid to establish her identity in a male dominated society the innocent child *Bhavana* climbs the top most branch of the tree in her school and to declare to the world that she could do anything that any boy of her age can. The scene where *Bhavana* climbs

the tree and declares her superiority to the hostile world has been presented quite symbolically by the author to bring out the paradox of being a female and nurturing the sky high aspirations,

Young Bhavana: I spilt out with a vengeance. Why was I terrified? Why was I ashamed? That shame took away my moment of triumph. I proved myself, on top of somebody's head. In somebody's lunch box. They all knew I was a woman and they all knew I could climb the tree.

Bhavana: I became women, standing on the highest branch of the tallest mango tree in my yard. Looking down at the world. (p. 71, *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*)

Bhavana who had successfully announced to the world that she can conquer the world had to face the humiliation because of being a women. Isn't it ironical that a girl is betrayed even by nature? That despite achieving the laurels of the world she is still avoiding the eyes that stared at her. Bhavana feels like never going back to her school and when her mother tries to alleviate her shame and revulsion she riposted that 'They don't want me in school and you never wanted me.' Bhavana reflecting over past with the help of her own childhood is exposed to the bitter truth of life that her father never wanted to have a daughter being born in his house. This exposure leads us to face another equally wrenching truth about the condition of women in India, where we find Bhavana's mother facing extreme odds to save the life of her daughter from her husband. She hides the facts that she has given birth to baby girl from her family for five years and brings her up as her son. The fear that Bhavana's mother faces is that she will be thrown out of the house if she fails to give the family a male child and perhaps and probably she is also suffering from the guilt of her incapability of producing a boy.

Bhavana's father's selfish attitude is brought to froth when he could not recognize the Young Bhavana as he had never cared for her as a child since he has only known her as Bhuvan, the name given to Bhavana by her father thinking that she was a male child. At the age of five when he came to know that the child born in his family is a girl he detached himself completely from the child to the extent of not even recognizing her in her childhood. The same man who had always encouraged his son Bhuvan (Bhavana) to become a pilot and fly near the moon was even against educating Bhavana properly let alone inspiring her to go to the Mars.

The incongruous behaviors of Bhavana's father who at moment of glory of his daughter declares his faith in God and in His powers are apparent. If a person has faith in God why can't he simply accept His blessings in the form of a daughter? Equally ironical is his remark regarding his daughter's responsibility about being the first Indian women to step on the moon who will pave the way for future generations of Indians having similar aspirations. Bhavana's father's attitude towards his daughter i.e. initially that of rejection of her very existence and later on when he sees her at a celebrity stature where the world is in awe of her where he proudly announces that Bhavana is his daughter seems like a hard slap on the face of his male chauvinist attitude. Above all this is nothing but a proof of the defeat of his ideology of inferiority of one sex over other.

Whether it is Tara or Bhavana, they both represent the quintessential modern middle class girls, who despite hailing from educated class suffer gender discrimination. Through these two characters Dattani has represented two different types of struggles that women are pitched against. Whereas Tara seems to be fighting a lost battle, Bhavana not only wages a war against biased attitude of her father and the society at large and evinces her worth uprightly in a male dominated world to the extent of being an iconic figure not only for her generation but also for many more generations to

come. Therefore, in the final analysis, Bhavana emerges as a winner and Tara unfortunately could not survive the battle of her existence. We must not ignore the reason behind these two contradictory fates of two ladies. The strength that Bhavana got from her mother was missing in Tara. The conclusion that a study of these two plays of Dattani seems to produce is that, firstly, if a woman supports another woman she can conquer insurmountable challenges put to her. Secondly, these two plays also put forward the conclusion that gender is psychologically different from sex and is very much a social phenomena. Particularly in the play Tara, the concept has been presented vividly through the symbol of Siamese twins comprising of Tara and Chandan,

And that is why he would prefer to say that this play is more about the 'gendered' self, about acknowledging the female side of oneself. The tale is, after all, narrated by Chandan, the male half of the whole of which 'other' is Tara. (p.70 Asha Kuthari)

The paradigm of 'Ardha-Naarishwar' in Hindu mythology which represents God, a female and male entity existing in the same body, is perhaps the best analogy to understand Dattani's concept of 'gendered' self. Even God never wanted women to be secondary to men, the nature has designed them in a tandem to propel the smooth functioning of the world but we human are responsible for the suffering of other half of the same body.

CONCLUSIONS

The probing insight of Dattani into female psyche and depth of his understanding of condition of female in society emerges out so stalwartly that it wrenches the conscience of his readers. One simply marvels at his dexterity of portraying the individual picture of female predicament and presenting it vis-a vis in the composite picture of society. The quandary of condition of women and the questions raised through his plays give everyone food for thought and audience can not help but to think over it intensely. In this sense his plays unequivocally become a contrivance of social criticism. He undergirds the cause of uplifting the position of women and moreover protecting them from the barbaric tradition of treating them always second to men.

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